

## VIKINGS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE CIVIL WAR (1046) IN GEORGIA

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### Introduction

The Church Council, held in Metz, France, on May 1, 888, decreed that, since then, “A furore Normannorum libera nos, o Domine” (“From the fury of Northmen deliver us, O Lord”) was to become a prayer in the litany in Western European churches and monastic institutions<sup>1</sup>. God’s mercy was the only thing to count on during the times of the devastating attacks of Scandinavian warriors. People in France remembered well what had happened three years earlier when Norsemen surrounded Paris and kept the city under siege for ten months. If not Count Odo’s braveness and shrewdness, the city would have become a subject to devastation on the part of Scandinavian warriors. Paris did stand firm against Norsemen; however, Scandinavians subjected the rich provinces along the Seine to merciless pillage. The decree by the Church Council in Metz was an echo of that horrible event. However, it was not only the siege of Paris that drove holy fathers to adopt such a resolution. Long before the later half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Western Europe were well aware of Norsemen. Almost a century had passed after Scandinavians’ warships secretly approached the British Isles.

Norman invasions to Western Europe began from the 790<sup>s</sup>. In 793, they ruthlessly destroyed the abbey on Lindisfarne and killed the monks. Some decades later, the geographic area of Norsemen’s raids grew considerably. England, France, Ireland became targets of their aggression. They destroyed towns and villages with fire and sword. A chronicler reports that, following the raid in one of the abbeys in England, Norsemen boasted that “we had conducted good liturgy with their heads on tips of our spears.”

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<sup>1</sup> Iv. Menteshashvili, *History of England*. Tbilisi, 2004 [in Georgian], p. 22; Lebedev, G. S. *The Epoch of Vikings in Northern Europe*. Leningrad, 1985 [in Russian], p. 19.



Norsemen's raids in Western Europe lasted almost three centuries (8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> cc.)<sup>2</sup>. In France, the warriors from Svadinavia were referred to as Norsemen, meaning 'those who came from the North.' The English called them Danes, Byzantines -- Varangians, and Russians -- Varyags. Scandinavians referred to the warriors, involved in far away raids, as Vikings.

Since the later half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, numerous military detachments of Vikings served as guards to the Byzantine Emperor. In Constantinople, the place, where the Vikings (Varangians) lived, was referred to as "væringia skift" or "væringjaseta"<sup>3</sup>. The mercenaries' mission was to guard the palace and the Emperor. Vikings got to Byzantium mostly through Russia. This is not surprising as far as the advancement of Kiev and Novgorod, and, later, the formation of the state of Kiev was partially associated with Vikings. First Russian principals had Scandinavian names. Some of the warriors used to go directly to Constantinople for military service, others went to Kiev first, and, after a certain period of time, got to Byzantium. The guards at the Emperor's court began to include the Norsemen, having settled in Sicily.

#### **"And Varangians came"**

In the 1040<sup>s</sup>, a terrible civil war was under way in Georgia. Bagrat IV, King of Georgia, and Liparit Baghvashi, Duke of Kldekari, confronted each other in order to become dominant. The war lasted for fifteen years, including intervals.

In 1041, the parties managed to come to a peace agreement; however, peace did not last long in the country. In 1045, Liparit Baghvashi took the side of Byzantines, and made Bagrat IV lose the Armenian kingdom of Ani. This fact triggered a new stage in the civil war.

In the same year, the enemies avoided immediate fighting. Both Bagrat IV and Liparit Baghvash preferred the tactics of the mobilization of forces. Liparit appealed to Byzantines for help. The royal authorities of Georgia contacted Vikings.

<sup>2</sup> Literature about Norsemen abound. I am listing some of the works, summarizing the rich historiographic resources on the issue in point: Yves Cohat, *The Vikings, Lords of the Seas*. Thames and Hudson, 1999; Peter Sawyer, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*. Oxford University Press, 1999; R. H. C. Davis, *The Normans and their Myth*. Thames and Hudson, 1997; Magnus Magnusson, *The Vikings*. London, 2000; Christopher Gravett and David Nicolle, *The Normans: Warrior Knights and their Castles*. Oxford, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> E. A. Rydzevskaya, On military relationships of Scandinavians and Rus to Byzantium based on the Greek-Russian agreements and the sagas. In: E. A. Rydzevskaya, *Ancient Rus and Scandinavia in the 9<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> cc.* [in Russian]. Moscow, 1978, p. 157.



Georgians must have learned about Vikings from Byzantines. The name *Varang*, attested in Georgian sources, corresponds to their Greek name. In the same period, Georgia had economic and cultural links with the Slavonic world where Vikings were rather popular. Hence, Georgians could have true information about Scandinavian warriors' courage and fighting spirit. This is what conditioned the decision of Bagrat IV, King of Georgia in the mid 11<sup>th</sup> century, to hire Vikings (Varangians) to oppose Liparit Baghvashi, Duke of Kldekari. The author of *The Georgian Chronicle* notes: "And three thousand Varangians came, and settled in Bashi; seven hundred men stepped out, and Bagrat came with his army and Varangians joined him. They did not wait; Meskhs stepped out and fought in Sasireti forest; the local army retreated. In the war, Abuseri and other nobility were caught; Varangians could no longer stand and were taken prisoner; Liparit treated them courteously, offering them food, and then permitted them to withdraw from Eastern Georgia through the Likhi mountain range"<sup>4</sup>. As the source informs, Varangian mercenaries initially landed near the village of Bashi, at the mouth of the Rioni river (the village was part of the civil administrative and territorial polity, which was a royal domain). Bagrat IV invited 3000 Vikings to Georgia. The king took only 700 Varangians to the decisive battle to Sasireti forest.

### Vikings in Georgian Historiography

The passage from *The Georgian Chronicle* is truly unique. The historian has preserved one of the interesting episodes of the 11th century Georgian history, which has not at all been dealt with by other written sources. This is the only case when Scandinavian warriors are referred in the Georgian history.

For several decades, historians have been studying the passage from *The Georgian Chronicle*. Mainly there have been three issues evoking contradictions among scholars: 1. Identity of the Varangians' Georgian ally; 2. Varangians' ethnic background, and 3. Chronological framework of their presence in Georgia. I will discuss each of the problems in its turn:

#### **1. Identity of the Varangians' Georgian ally**

There are two main approaches to the issue. One part of scholars believe that it was Liparit Baghvashi who invited the Varangians to Georgia

<sup>4</sup> *The Georgian Chronicle, Life of Kartli*. The Text, established based on all the main manuscripts by S. Kaukhchishvili. Vol. 1. [in Georgian]. Tbilisi, 1955, p. 301.

and they were enrolled in his army. The approach has been held by Niko Berdzenishvili,<sup>5</sup> Vasil Kopaliani,<sup>6</sup> Kveli Chkhataishvili,<sup>7</sup> Vakhtang Goiladze,<sup>8</sup> Anri Bogveradze,<sup>9</sup> Dermisha Gogoladze,<sup>10</sup> Natela Vachnadze and Giorgi Cheishvili,<sup>11</sup> and others.

Contrary to this approach, the Varangians were assumed as invited by Bagarat IV by the following authors: Sulkhan Baratashvili,<sup>12</sup> Mose Janashvili,<sup>13</sup> Dimitri Bakradze,<sup>14</sup> Iase Tsintsadze,<sup>15</sup> Zurab Papaskiri,<sup>16</sup> Roin Metreveli,<sup>17</sup> Giorgi Anchabadze,<sup>18</sup> Bakur Sulakauri,<sup>19</sup> Vazha Kiknadze,<sup>20</sup> and others.

Normally, while addressing the issue of the identity of the Varangians' Georgian ally, mainly the following two details, occurring in the text of *The Georgian Chronicle*, should be an outset:

The first is the fact that the Varangians landed in Bashi, and the second is the Varangians itinerary from Bashi to Sasireti forest. It is the discus-

<sup>5</sup> N. Berdzenishvili, Review of Iase Tsintsadze, *Studies in the History of Russia-Georgia Relationships. Essays of the History of Georgia*, Vol. 5 [in Georgian]. Tbilisi, 1971, pp. 197-201.

<sup>6</sup> V. Kopaliani, *Political Relationship of Georgia and Byzantium in 970-1070* [in Georgian]. Tbilisi, 1969, pp. 227-228.

<sup>7</sup> K. Chkhataishvili, Foreigners in the 12<sup>th</sup> c. Georgian Army. *Georgia in the Epoch of Rustaveli* [in Georgian]. Tbilisi, 1966, p. 178.

<sup>8</sup> V. Goiladze, ვიკინგები საქართველოში, მნათობი, No 4, Tbilisi, 1984, p. 170.

<sup>9</sup> A. Bogveradze, A note about "Varangians" visit to Georgia in 1047 from *The Georgian Chronicle. Issues of the Georgian History of the Feudal Epoch*, Vol. 6 [in Georgian]. Tbilisi, 1990, pp. 70-81.

<sup>10</sup> D. Gogoladze, A note about "Varangians" from *The Georgian Chronicle. Georgian Diplomacy*, No 5 [in Georgian]. Tbilisi, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> N. Vachnadze & G. Cheishvili, Scandinavia and Georgia: Contrastive Mentalities (11<sup>th</sup> c.). *Conference Dedicated to Ivane Javakhishvili's 120<sup>th</sup> Birthday (November 18-20, 1996; Tbilisi). Abstracts of Papers* [in Georgian]. Tbilisi, 1997. See a fuller version of the paper: Vachnadze, Natela & Giorgi Cheishvili, New characters of the Georgian history. *Dedicatio, Historical and Philological Studies* [in Georgian]. Tbilisi, 2001, pp. 92-123.

<sup>12</sup> S. Baraton, *History of Georgia. Fascicle 2-3. Mediaeval History* [in Russian]. Saint Petersburg, 1871, pp. 62-63. Georgian translation: *The Georgian History by Duke S. Baratashvili*. Translated by S. Khundadze. *Fascicle 3. Mediaeval History*. Kutaisi, 1913, pp. 108-110.

<sup>13</sup> M. Janashvili, *History of Georgia* [in Georgian]. Tbilisi, 1894, p. 88.

<sup>14</sup> D. Bakradze, *King of Georgia Bagrat IV (1027-1072)* [in Georgian]. Tbilisi, 1880, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> I. Tsintsadze, *Studies in the History of Russia-Georgia Relationships (10<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> cc.)* [in Georgian]. Tbilisi, 1956, pp. 23-44.

<sup>16</sup> Z. V. Papaskiri, 'Varangians' in *The Georgian Chronicle* and historical issues of the Russia-Georgia contacts in the 11<sup>th</sup> century [in Russian]. *History of the USSR*, No 3. Moscow, 1981, pp. 164-169. Z. V. Papaskiri, *From the History of Russia-Georgia Political Relations* [in Russian]. Tbilisi, 1982, pp. 34-43. Z. V. Papaskiri, *Emergence of the Unified Georgian Feudal State and Some Issues of Georgia's External Political Situation* [in Georgian]. Tbilisi, 1990, pp. 179-201.

<sup>17</sup> R. Metreveli, "And Varangians came..." *A Historico-Philological Essay* [in Georgian]. Tbilisi, 1988, pp. 75-76.

<sup>18</sup> G. Anchabadze, *Determining the meaning of "internal army"* [in Georgian]. *Matsne, Series of History...*, No 1. Tbilisi, 1987, p. 85.

<sup>19</sup> B. Sulakauri, ვიკინგები საქართველოში, განათლება, November 6, 1992.

<sup>20</sup> V. Kiknadze, Bagrat IV, Liparit Baghvashi, and Varangians [in Georgian]. *Dedicated to the Memory of Alexandre Orbeliani*. Tbilisi, 1998.

sion of these issues after which light will be shed upon the identity of the Varangians' ally.

1) As it has been repeatedly stated above, Varangians landed in the village of Bashi. The settlement is situated in Samtredia District, Western Georgia. The distance between Bashi and Kutaisi is 25-30 kilometers. In that period, the region was a royal domain. If we assume Varangians to be supporters of Liparit Baghvashi, it seems that the Duke dislocated his troops in the royal domain. This is nonsense as far as, based on what is retold in *The Georgian Chronicle*, in the battle near Sasireti, King Bagrat was supported by "the inner army," which, as established by Georgian scholars, had come from the royal domain<sup>21</sup>.

It should also be borne in mind that, as it has been known from a Georgian source, of the Varangians army, consisting of 3000, only 700 went to Eastern Georgia to fight in the war. The rest 2300 warriors stayed at the site. Naturally enough, Bagrat IV was aware of that; however, he went to fight Liparit Baghvashi. If the Varangians supported Liparit, how the king was guaranteed that 2300 Varangians would not take over Kutaisi, the capital left by him?! Truly, it was not a small force. The Varangians landed in Bashi without any problems; they neither were opposed by anyone, nor they opposed anybody. Later, after the return of their compatriots from Eastern Georgia, the Varangians left the country without any complications. This is an immediate indication to the fact that the Varangians were supporters of the person who was in charge of Western Georgia. It is not up to possessing specifically Bashi. Before reaching Bashi, the Varangians sailed 110 kilometers from the Black Sea up the Rioni river; this means that the individual, who had invited them, was in charge of as rather vast territory of the Kingdom of Abkhazia. It was only Bagrat IV.

2) After the Varangians' landing in Bashi, a part of mercenaries went to Sasireti, Eastern Georgia, where, following the author of *The Georgian Chronicle*, the decisive war took place between Liparit Baghvashi and Bagrat IV. Sasireti is situated in present-day Kaspi District. Hence, in order to reach the place, the Varangians had to cover quite a long distance in Western Georgia, from Bashi to Likhi mountain, and, then, they would get to Eastern Georgia through mountain passes. The Varangians passed the whole territory peacefully, without any complications. It is totally groundless to claim that, in that period, Bagrat IV could not control the

<sup>21</sup> G. Anchabadze, *Determining the meaning of "internal army,"* pp. 88-89.

territory between Bashi and Likhi mountain. As it has been repeatedly stated, the Varangians moved through mountain passes. It is doubtless that those passes were guarded by the central authorities of Georgia. Even in such hard periods as it was during Seljuq Turk and Mongol invasions, passes of Likhi mountain were controlled by guards of the Georgian king. Otherwise, it is hardly comprehensible how such a numerous detachment of Varangians could pass Likhi mountain.

The aforementioned highlights that the Varangians were with Bagrat IV and acted according to his will. Therefore, they have not been with the Duke of Kldekari, and, since the very beginning, supported the king of Georgia. This implies that the Varangians were not sent by Byzantines; they were hired by the king of Georgia and were enrolled in the army of Bagrat IV in the battle in Sasireti.

## 2. *Varangians' ethnic background*

What was the ethnic background of the Varangians? At first, the issue in point should not have been argued in Georgian historiography; however, it is true that many scholars questioned the Scandinavian origin of the Varangians. In 1871-1875, the journal of the Russian Ministry of People's Education published Academician V. Vasilevsky's rather remarkable article "Varangian-Russian and Varangian-English detachment in Constantinople in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries"<sup>22</sup>. In the work, the Russian Byzantologist referred to the Varangians, who visited Georgia, as Russian Varangians. It was V. Vasilevsky's article that gave an impulse to some generations of Georgian scholars to judge the information from *The Georgian Chronicle* within the context of Georgian-Russian relationships, and to view representatives of Eastern Slavonic tribes among the Varangians, having landed in the forests near Rioni and Tedzami (Niko Berdznishvili, Iase Tsintsadze, Vasil Kopaliani, Zurab Papaskiri, Roin Metreveli, etc.).

1966 saw the publication of the anthology *Georgia in the Epoch of Rustaveli*, within the framework of Shota Rustaveli's 800<sup>th</sup> jubilee. The anthology included Kveli Chkhataishvili's interesting paper "Foreigners in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Georgian army"<sup>23</sup>. It was initially in the said paper that the author questioned the identity of Varangians and Russians. K. Chkhataishvili assumed the presence of Norsemen in Georgia even

<sup>22</sup> The article was later included in Volume 1 of V. Vasilevsky's works; see Vasilevsky, V. G. Varangian-Russian and Varangian-English detachment in Constantinople. *Works by V. G. Vasilevsky*, Vol. 1 [in Russian]. Saint Petersburg, 1908.

<sup>23</sup> K. Chkhataishvili, *Foreigners in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Georgian army*, pp. 180-182.



under Queen Tamar (based on C. Grimberg's work). Vakhtang Goiladze attempted to prove the identity of the Varangians of the Georgian source and of Vikings<sup>24</sup>. In his opinion, the event, described in *The Georgian Chronicle*, and the history of Ingvar the Far-Traveller, as described in the Icelandic saga, must have been associated. The theme was elaborated by Bakur Sulakauri in his article "Vikings in Georgia"<sup>25</sup>. Recently, the Scandinavian origin of the Varangians, who supported Bagrat IV, was dealt with by Natela Vachnadze and Giorgi Cheishvili<sup>26</sup>.

It is true that a number of controversial approaches have been available concerning the ethnic background of Varangians, but it should be stated that most of the scholars consider the Varangians as Scandinavians. This approach has been dominant even in Russian historiography.

### **3. Chronology of the Varangians' presence in Georgia**

The issue in case has never become a subject to special investigations in Georgian historiography. The opposition of Bagrat IV and Liparit Baghvashi was dated back to 1046-1047. In that case, the Varangians' visit to Georgia came on 1047. I wrote some papers concerning the issue in point and, hence, I will not elaborate on it. The only thing to be mentioned is that the opposition between Bagrat IV and Liparit began in 1045, following the Byzantine takeover of the polity of Ani (the autumn of 1045), and lasted till the spring of 1046. Thus, the Varangians' visit to Georgia should be assumed in the summer of 1046.

### **Battle of Sasireti**

#### **1. About one assumption**

Of the 3000 Varangians, deployed in the village of Bashi, the king of Georgia took only 700 warriors to Inner Kartli, to fight Liparit. This detail is salient as far as it is hardly comprehensible why Bagrat IV left 2300 Vikings in Western Georgia. In that crucial moment of time, the king needed military force, and it is strange enough that he took only 700 Scandinavians to fight the Duke of Kldekari. What could have been its reason? Two things may be assumed: 1. Bagrat left 2300 warriors in Western Georgia in order to guard Kutaisi and mountain passes of Likhi, and 2. the Vikings,

<sup>24</sup> V. Goiladze, ვიკინგები საქართველოში, მნათობი, No 4, Tbilisi, 1984, p. 170.

<sup>25</sup> B. Sulakauri, ვიკინგები საქართველოში, განათლება, November 6, 1992.

<sup>26</sup> N. Vachnadze & G. Cheishvili, New characters of the Georgian history. *Dedicatio, Historical and Philological Studies* [in Georgian]. Tbilisi, 2001, pp. 92-123.

left in Western Georgia, were no good for fighting. I will elaborate on the latter assumption. Vakhtang Goiladze advanced a rather bold approach which somehow was not supported in that period. In his opinion, the Vikings, visiting Georgia, must have been the Scandinavian warriors (staying at the royal court of the prince of Kiev) having been imprisoned during the Russian invasion in Constantinople in 1043. It was in 1043 when the united army of Russians and Varangians surrounded Constantinople from the sea and the land<sup>27</sup>. By means of “Byzantine fire,” Byzantines destroyed the Russian-Varagian fleet, and then attacked the invaders on the ground. In H. Ahrweiler’s opinion, the Byzantines success was conditioned by two factors: the storm and “the Byzantine fire.” He believes that the success in the sea was not up to the Byzantines as far as the Empire did not have mighty naval forces by that period of time<sup>28</sup>. After defeating the Russians and Varangians near Constantinople, the Byzantines started to persecute them. The exact number of imprisoned warriors is unknown; however, only near Varna, Katakalon Kekaumenos imprisoned 800 warriors on their way to the homeland. Based on some Oriental sources (Ali ibn al-Athir, Abu’l-Faraj), the warriors, who surrendered to the Byzantines, were pardoned by the Emperor’s order and were not sentenced to severe punishments, while those, imprisoned during fighting, were cut their right arms<sup>29</sup>.

The participants of the Russian-Varagian invasion in Constantinople were imprisoned for three years and were released only in 1043. Some of them (those who had not lost their fighting efficiency) might have agreed (for some fee) to support Bagrat IV in his battle. This can be viewed as certain revenge as far as Liparit was backed by Byzantines, implacable enemies of the Vikings who had suffered from imprisonment.

It is hard to ascertain the aforementioned; however, this can only be assumed. In any case, the fact, that 2300 men stayed in Bashi, sounds rather strange, and it is hard to explain it. This so far unexplained detail makes me associate it with the Russians and Varangians, imprisoned in Byzantium in 1043-1046. Most of them were either one-armed or injured, and, hence, unfit for fighting. A smaller part of them were actually capable to fight.

<sup>27</sup> V. Goiladze, ვიკინგები საქართველოში, მნათობი, No 4, Tbilisi, 1984, p. 170.

<sup>28</sup> H. Ahrweiler, *Byzance et la mer*. Paris, 1965, p. 128-134.

<sup>29</sup> G. Vernadsky, The Byzantine-Russian war of 1043. *Suedostforschungen*. 1953. – B. 12, pp. 52; G. G. Litavrin, *Byzantium, Bulgaria, Ancient Rus (9<sup>th</sup> c. – early 12<sup>th</sup> c.)* [in Russian]. Saint Petersburg, 2000, p. 253.



## 2. *Decisive battle in Sasireti*

The decisive battle, as reported in *The Georgian Churonicle*, took place near Sasireti forest. The place is situated in Inner Kartli, at the bank of the Tedzami river. Belligerents were likely to be dislocated along the opposite banks of the river. Bagrat IV was not going to begin fighting as far as he expected additional forces from his loyal noblemen in Southern Georgia. However, an unpredicted action took place: being confident in their own strength, the Vikings attacked Liparit's forces without the consent of the commanders. This made the king get involved in the battle. The Georgian chronicler notes with surprise: "Meskhs did not expect the Varangians; they came on, and they fought near Sasireti forest." The Duke of Kldekari was backed by the Byzantine troops. The bloody bout ended in the defeat of the Vikings' small detachment and Bagrat's army. The royal army was severely defeated. The defeat was caused by the unbalanced actions of the king's troops, which was made use by the duke, and Bagrat's army retreated. The duke won; however, his success yielded in the outcomes beyond his expectations. During the battle, he caught the Varangian detachment consisting of seven hundred warriors whom the king brought to Kartli. Besides, in Sasireti forest, Liparit Baghvashi imprisoned the noblemen, loyal to the king.

Liparit Baghvashi did not kill the imprisoned Vikings and only sentenced them to ashaming; later, he let them withdraw to join their compatriots, dislocated in Bashi. It seems that the Vikings promised Liparit to leave Georgia together with the rest of 2300 warriors as soon as they returned to the banks of Rioni.

This is how the story of the Vikings' presence in Georgia ended. This is another fact that widens the area of Scandinavian warriors' activities in Eastern Europe.